

Customer Engagement in Private Sector Healthcare: How Does it Affect Customer Loyalty

Tharoosha Jayalath¹ and Badra Sandamali Galdolage^{1*}

¹*Department of Marketing Management, Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce,
University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka.*

Authors' contributions

Both authors collaboratively worked on planning and designing the study. Author TJ Carried out data collection. Both the authors contributed in analyzing data and writing the manuscript. Both of them read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Service sector grows rapidly and gives a foremost contribution to the world economy. In Sri Lanka, the service sector contributes more than 55% to the Gross Domestic Production. Among such services, health care is pioneering and includes many businesses and a wide variety of organizations. Within the healthcare sector, this study focuses on the private sector hospitals where customer engagement is very high. However, the scholarly attention given to understanding customer engagement and its impact is very rare, particularly in the healthcare sector in Sri Lankan context. Therefore, this study aims to examine the impact of customer engagement on customer loyalty in private sector hospitals. Based on the positivism, a quantitative survey was carried out distributing more than 200 questionnaires among people who have visited private sector hospitals in Colombo district, chosen based on convenience sampling method. The rationale behind limiting the study to Colombo district is, many of the private sector hospitals are located in this district in Sri Lanka. The data were analyzed with descriptive statistics and regression. The study found a high level of customer engagement in private sector healthcare and has a strong positive impact on customer loyalty. As implications, the study suggests private sector healthcare to manage customer engagements providing positive experience in order to sustain a loyal customer base.

*Corresponding author: E-mail: sandamali@sjp.ac.lk;

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1. INTRODUCTION

Service sector around the world provides a growing contribution to the economy [1] while in Sri Lanka it records more than 55% contribution to the GDP [2]. Services can be grouped into many sectors, such as cleaning and maintenance service, construction, death care, education, entertainment, health care, financial service, fabric care, food service, social service etc. Among them, the health care sector is expanding rapidly [3] and consists of many businesses that provide medical services, manufacture medical equipment or drugs, medical insurance to patients etc [4]. In Sri Lanka, the health care mainly comprises public and private hospitals [5]. While state sector hospitals provide service to their customers free of charge, private sector hospitals charge fees for each type of services they provide such as room, food, laboratory, pharmacy, consultation etc. However, an increasing demand towards private sector hospitals is witnessed in Sri Lanka [6]. When comparing the past and present conditions in private sector hospitals, it shows significant differences in service quality, novelty, social value, price, technology, specialties, service staff etc. Currently it provides tremendous opportunities to earn high profit due to high demand coming from customers.

Healthcare customers are different from those in other services [7]. They are patients or related to any sicknesses. Most of the time, healthcare customers are helpless since they demand for life or good health while having low or no influencing power as well as limited knowledge about the feasible solutions [8]. Therefore, customers prefer the service providers who explain the problems well and seek their engagement throughout the decision-making process. However, promoting such engagement behaviour is hard for state sector hospitals due to prevailing high demand and fundamental difficulties such as lack of human and physical resources. Filling that market gap, private sector health care promotes their services as friendly, welcoming, and caring with high privacy. They incorporate quality, technology, novelty to attract and retain the customers [9].

Health care belongs to the 'people processing services' category where the processing element is the human body [10]. Therefore, compared to some other services, customer involvement is

naturally high in health care. Customers need to visit the service premise, interact with service staff, and sometimes need to stay hours, days or even months in the hospitals to get treatments. Therefore, none other services than health care have a high level of customer engagement in the production and delivery of the service. The way that hospitals facilitate the customer engagement, helps to determine the customers level of satisfaction and loyalty [11].

However, there was a very little scholarly attention given to understand this nature of customer engagement and its influence on customer loyalty. Thus, this study aims at examining customer engagement in private sector hospitals and measuring its impact on building loyalty.

Next, the paper presents the conceptual background of the study, subsequently, the methodology of the study is elaborated before providing the findings and discussion. Third, theoretical and practical contributions are discussed along with the limitations and future research directions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Health Care in Service Sector

Services are mainly processes consisting of activities or a series of activities [12] which mostly need to produce and consume simultaneously [10]. Further, customer participation in the service production process is very high [13] compared to the products [14]. Among many classifications of the services, health care belongs to high involvement services [15] in which customer engagement is exceedingly high [16]. Further, it can be recognised as having a complex service system [17] which is a classic example for people intensive services. In people intensive services, employees have to play a key role which cannot be replaced from any other options such as advanced technologies [18]. In a similar classification, healthcare belongs to 'people processing service' in which the processing element becomes customers [10]. Therefore, in healthcare interaction between service provider and the customer turn out to be unavoidable.

In high-involvement services, the interactive element of service provision has a vital role in

perceptions of the overall quality of service [19]. Primary health care as a high-involvement service has to play a major role by having direct and strong relationships with its customers to perceive them that they are caring and respecting customers' requirements [20]. Customers in the healthcare lack in technical expertise to judge the technical quality and therefore, they evaluate the service using some other dimensions which reflect what they personally value as 'trust' 'empathy' etc [11].

The private sector is playing an important role in health care, including in low- and middle-income countries [21]. People are increasingly attracted to the private sector hospitals due to difficulties that they face in public sector healthcare [22]. In the private sector, customers need to pay for the services that they receive whereas in the public sector health care is maintained under the government and supply free service [23]. When we look at the past, the private sector healthcare is different from the present situation, an account of, service quality, novelty, social value, price, technology, specialties etc [22].

2.2 Healthcare Customers and their Engagement

Customer participation is outlined as "the degree to which the customer is involved in producing and delivering the service" [24, p 484]. According to Mohsen, Hussein [25] customer engagement is a state of mind such that when service providers address their emotions, the level of customer engagement will be increased and they feel happy and comfortable. Additionally, customer engagement is recognized as a multilevel construct that emerges from the thoughts and feelings about one or more rich experiences involved in reaching a personal goal [26]. Similarly, customer engagement outlined as customer interactions to foster emotional or psychological bonds between customers and firms [27].

Bitner, Faranda [28] identify three levels of the customer participation as low, moderate and high level, where the low level of customer participation only requires the customer's presence in service delivery, the moderate level involves the customer's inputs and the high level of participation involves the customer as a co-producer. Dong, Evans [29] state that when the level of customer participation increases, the customer is more likely to be an active value receiver. Customer active participation with

organisations [30] by way of providing suggestions, being cooperative and conscientious were also important [31].

Customer interaction and participation depends on numerous other factors such as 'trust, inclusiveness, and openness, etc. [32, p 8]. The role of 'knowledge sharing' is vital and contributes to enhance trust, build long-term partnerships, and achieve win-win situations [33]. Apart from that, 'relating', 'communicating' [34] and 'knowing' provide customer satisfaction [35]. Customers in the health care sector are different from others mainly due to lack of technical expertise and their inability in evaluating the service quality [36]. Thus, interactions and relationships become important in healthcare [37] and will be a reason to determine the perceptions of the overall quality of service [38] which aims at optimizing health and wellbeing [39].

Customer engagement results in many positive outcomes beyond purchasing emerging from motivational drivers. They are conceptualized in the domains of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects [40]. It contains a huge cluster of behaviours encompassing word-of-mouth (WOM), attention, recommendations, helping another client, blogging, including reviews, and even involving in lawful actions [41]. According to those researchers, customer engagement is always connected with consumers in mind, heart and actions.

Customer engagement is regarded as an extension to the relationship marketing domain and assist in obtaining competitive advantages. According to Islam and Rahman [42] most authors have acknowledged the multidimensional nature of this concept. Customer engagement construct comprises five dimensions: Identification, enthusiasm, attention, absorption and interaction [43]

Identification: Identification implies the degree to which a customer relates himself as a part of the business organization. Customers who are loyal to service providers consider criticisms against the organization as a personal insult to them and view themselves as part of the company. These consumers also tend to identify themselves with the provider's success [43, p 953].

Enthusiasm: "Enthusiasm relates to the extent to which customers are passionate about their engagement with the service provider. It is

believed that enthusiastic consumers are keen and passionate about the provider's activities" [43, p 953].

Attention: "Attention means the customer's level of concentration on the engagement with the service provider. Customers who are concentrating on the provider may need to learn more about it and pay attention to any facet related to it and focus widely on the provider" [43, p 953].

Absorption: "Absorption is recognized as a more radical state of attention. Customers who are absorbed with their service provider tend to ignore other things when interacting with them. They may interact with the service provider interestingly and feel time flies when dealing with the provider. They may be genuinely engaged with the service provider and feel that it would be difficult to move away from them" [43, p 954].

Interaction: "Interaction determines the extent to which customers participate with the organizations' activities in online or offline platforms. Outside the purchase situation customers may communicate with other customers about the provider and enjoy interactions with consumers similar to them who are also interested in the provider" [43, p 954].

2.3 Customer Loyalty

Loyalty is attachment that consumers may exhibit towards brands, services, stores, product categories and activities [44]. Customer loyalty has been identified as "the degree to which a customer exhibits repeat purchasing behavior from a service provider, possesses a positive attitudinal disposition toward the provider, and

considers using only this provider when a need for this service arises" [45, p 173]. Additionally, it is regarded as prospects of future repurchase or renewal by customers for an organization [46].

Customer Loyalty can be recognized under attitudinal and behavioral aspects [47]. As an attitudinal concept, it indicates the degree to which a consumer's disposition toward a service is favorably inclined [48]. This is shown through customer's willingness to endorse a service provider to other consumers [49] reliably over a certain period [50]. Similarly, as a behavioral concept, it indicates the customer's dedication to using a chosen service provider in spite of the presence of financial and location barriers [51]. Loyalty indicates positive feelings and behaviors such as repeat patronage [52] and purchases, and positive endorsements [53] which may influence other actual or potential customers. A loyal customer base is an invaluable resource for any organization [54]. It lessens the need to seek new customers [55] and gives a positive feedback that the organization's products and services are meeting the needs of a particular group of people [56].

Customer loyalty has generally been conceptualized as an outcome of the quality and customer satisfaction [53]. Loyalty has over the past decade become a crucial construct in marketing [57], and particularly in the burgeoning field of customer relationship management [58]. Customer loyalty plays an important role in healthcare services which reflects the quality of relationships [59].

Following Fig. 1 explains the conceptual framework of the study.

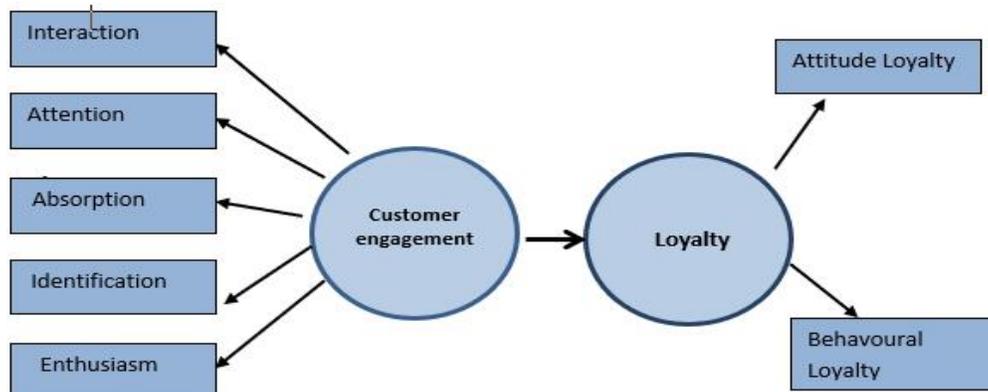


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework

This conceptual framework visualizes the hypotheses built to examine the main two objectives of the study. Accordingly,

H1: The level of customer engagement prevails high in the private sector healthcare in Sri Lanka

H2: The customer engagement has a significant positive impact on customer loyalty.

3. METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of this study is to measure the impact of customer engagement on customer loyalty in private sector healthcare. Positioning the study within the positivistic research paradigm, quantitative method was used to collect primary data using pre-designed self-administered questionnaires.

The population is recognized as people who get the services from private sector hospitals and those who live in Colombo district, Western Province. A sample of 200 was selected based on a non-probabilistic convenience sampling technique. Constructs were operationalized through a rigorous literature review and scales were developed with five-point Likert scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Before moving to the final survey, expert opinions were taken with the aim of further improving the research instrument. In addition to that a preliminary survey was conducted using 15 customers in private sector hospitals. Final survey took place in online platforms due to the travelling restrictions with Pandemic.

Data were checked for validity and reliability before the main analysis. Internal consistency of the items was measured using Cronbach's Alpha and validity was ensured through content validity, construct validity and discriminant validity. The analysis was mainly done using descriptive statistics, T test, and regression techniques.

3.1 Validation of Measurement properties

An exploratory factor analysis was carried out with the data reduction purpose and to ensure the uni-dimensionality nature of the data. According to findings of initial factor analysis, weak indicators which have correlations with two or more indicators, were removed. The pattern matrix of the factor analysis is given in the Table 1.

3.2 Test of Validity and Reliability

Validity can be assessed through examining the content validity, criterion validity, and construct validity [60]. This study ensures the content validity since all the indicators (independent variables and a dependent variable) developed using well-established literature. Convergent validity was ensured by checking factor loadings, squared multiple correlations, average variance extracted, reliability etc.

According to the Table 2, All Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values are greater than 0.5 ensuring the appropriateness of using factor analysis on data. Significance values are less than 0.05. Composite Reliability (CR) values are greater than 0.7, finally Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values are greater than 0.5 ensuring the validity of the data. According to the findings Cronbach's Alpha values of both the independent and dependent variables are greater than 0.7 indicating the reliability of the data.

All squared correlation among all dimensions were lower than the AVE on the individual dimensions which is satisfying discriminant validity as given in the Table 3.

4. RESULTS

The study mainly aims at examining the level of customer engagement and its impact on customer loyalty in private sector healthcare.

4.1 Hypothesis Testing

4.1.1 Examine the level of customer engagement in Private sector healthcare

The first objective is to examine the level of customer engagement in private sector health care in Sri Lanka. For that, researchers developed a decision criterion as, if the level of engagement is in between mean values of 1.00-2.50: Low Level of engagement, 2.51-3.50: Medium Level of engagement and 3.51 - 5.00 High level of engagement. The mean value for the customer engagement is found as 3.89 (with a 0.39 mean difference) which represents a high level. One sample T test was conducted to test whether these mean differences are statistically significant.

Table 1. Factor analysis

Pattern Matrix	Component						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I1 - Interaction	.445						
I2 Interaction	.532						
I3 Interaction	.656						
I4 Interaction	.517						
I5 Interaction	.743						
I6 Interaction	.715						
I7 Interaction	.570						
AT1 Attention		.592					
AT2 Attention		.429					
AT3 Attention		.635					
AT4 Attention		.723					
AT5 Attention		.714					
AB1 Absorption			.592				
AB2 Absorption			.674				
AB3 Absorption			.630				
AB4 Absorption			.630				
ID1 Identification				.740			
ID2 Identification				.745			
ID3 Identification				.639			
ID4 Identification				.714			
E1 Enthusiasm					.853		
E2 Enthusiasm					.891		
E3 Enthusiasm					.819		
E4 Enthusiasm					.873		
AL1 Attitude Loyalty						.833	
AL2 Attitude Loyalty						.840	
AL3 Attitude Loyalty						.827	
AL4 Attitude Loyalty						.831	
BL1 Behavioral Loyalty							.827
BL2 Behavioral Loyalty							.882
BL3 Behavioral Loyalty							.896
BL4 Behavioral Loyalty							.857

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 7 components extracted.

Table 2. Convergent validity

Dimension/Variable	Convergent validity test					
	KMO>0.5	BTS			CR 0.7	AVE>0.5
		Sig<0.5	Chi Square			
Interaction	.894	0.000	350.02	0.911	.596	
Attention	.828	0.000	207.68	0.892	.618	
Absorption	.709	0.000	142.95	0.868	.631	
Identification	.795	0.000	194.28	0.906	.709	
Enthusiasm	.812	0.000	221.97	0.782	.738	
Attitude Loyalty	.796	0.000	175.77	0.900	.693	
Behavioural Loyalty	.802	0.000	240.91	0.922	.750	

Table 3. Discriminant validity

	IN	AT	AB	ID	EM	AL	BL
Interaction	0.596						**
Attention	0.615	0.618					
Absorption	0.453	0.545	0.631				
Identification	0.406	0.301	0.552	0.709			
Enthusiasm	0.530	0.468	0.365	0.432	0.738		
Attitude Loyalty	0.506	0.578	0.358	0.367	0.520	0.693	
Behavioural Loyalty	0.381	0.432	0.348	0.386	0.452	0.613	0.75

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 4. One sample T test

One-Sample Test						
Test Value = 3.5						
T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
				Lower	Upper	
CE	16.268	104	.000	.89301	.7842	1.0019

According to the One sample T – Test (Table 4) the significance value is >0.05 rejecting the null hypothesis. Thus, it can be concluded that the level of customer engagement is at a high level at private sector health care.

4.1.2 Examine the impact of customer engagement on customer loyalty in private sector health care

A linear regression analysis was run to achieve this objective. According to the model summary (Table 5), the R square value is 0.64 and it

indicates that 64% of dependent variable (customer loyalty) is explained by the independent variable (customer engagement).

The ANOVA results (F=183.5, P,0.05) given in the Table 6, prove that the regression model is significant.

According to the Table 7, customer engagement in private sector healthcare has strong positive significant impact ($\beta=.923$ $p<.05$) on customer loyalty.

Table 5. Model summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.800 ^a	.641	.637	.39070

a. Predictors: (Constant), Customer Engagement
 b. Dependent Variable: Loyalty

Table 6. Anova table

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	28.037	1	28.037	183.668	.000 ^b
	Residual	15.723	103	.153		
	Total	43.760	104			

a. Dependent Variable: Loyalty
 b. Predictors: (Constant), Customer Engagement

Table 7. Coefficient table

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		β	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.446	.268		1.664	.089
	Customer Engagement	.923	.068	.800	13.552	.000

Dependent Variable: Loyalty

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

According to the findings, the level of customer engagement is recognised as high in private sector hospitals (Mean=3.89 SD=0.39). Similarly, Mohsen, Hussein [25], Vogenberg and Santilli [61], Lo Presti, Testa [62] and Velamuri, Anant [63] also point out that the customer engagement is higher in health care compared to the other types of service organisations. As Avgar, Givan [64] point out, being high involvement services, healthcare needs to be patient-centred.

Further, the study found customer engagement has a strong positive impact on customer loyalty in the health care sector ($\beta=.923$, $SE=.068$). In a similar note, Mohsen, Hussein [25] point out that customer engagement and their experience may determine the service quality, customer satisfaction as well as loyalty in healthcare. Vogenberg and Santilli [61] recognised increased customer engagement as a trend in healthcare which compel service providers to optimise customer solutions through innovative response systems. Similarly, Lo Presti, Testa [62] also pointed out the requirement of inventing digital tools which allow customer engagement through different platforms as needed in sustaining the business.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study consists of few limitations. First, it was limited to private sector healthcare, disregarding the state sector hospitals. Second, this study was geographically limited to Colombo district in Western Province. Though we rationalised selecting this city as a cogent decision since many of the private sector hospitals are in this commercial city, it is great if the study represents other cities in the country too. Therefore, there are avenues for future researchers to expand the study to the state-owned hospitals or conduct comparative analysis comparing private sector healthcare and state sector healthcare.

This research study would help practitioners to understand the importance of customer and the ways customers engage with service, especially with Private sector hospitals. Organisations can use this understanding to enhance customer positive experiences through engagement and then create a loyal customer base.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, respondents' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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